

5 HERODOTUS AND THE PERSIAN EMPIRE

Herodotus of Halicarnassus was a Greek historian—Greece's first known historian—who wrote between 450 and 420 B.C.E. He traveled widely in the Eastern Mediterranean world and based his history on what he was told and observed.

One of his obvious topics was the Persian Empire, which had formed after defeating a previous empire, that of the Medes, in the area now known as Iran. In 553 B.C.E., Cyrus the Great led a revolt against the Median king, Astyges, presumably with the help of some dissidents led by Harpagus—Astyges had arranged for his son to marry a Persian, and Cyrus was the result of that marriage; hence, he was the grandson of Astyges. Cyrus quickly expanded the Persian Empire to cover most of the Middle East, in the process attacking the many Greek cities in the region. Much later, a Persian effort to invade Greece, early in the 5th century, resulted in defeat and later still, Persia was conquered by Alexander the Great. Persian culture, however, took deep root in the region, and Persia in many ways constituted a fourth great classical civilization in Eurasia.

In the passage that follows, Herodotus offers his own version of Cyrus's rise (earlier, he repeats a Moses-like story of Cyrus being hidden from the king and brought up in a humble family despite his high birth; the story may have circulated widely, but it was not true). He also discusses a variety of Persian characteristics. His account raises two main kinds of questions: First, what aspects of Persian society were unusual, compared to other early civilizations, and what were fairly standard? The second set of questions involves Herodotus's accuracy: he was a sympathetic observer in many ways, despite Greek-Persian hostility before his lifetime. But he almost certainly did not speak Persian and so depended on stories, some of which may not have been true.

THE HISTORIES

When Cyrus grew up to be the bravest and most popular young man in Persia, Harpagus, who was burning for revenge upon Astyges, began to pay him court and send him presents. His own position, he thought, was inadequate to justify hopes of punishing the king without assistance; so when he saw Cyrus coming to maturity, he

From *The Histories* by Herodotus, translated by Aubrey de Sélincourt, revised with introductory matter and notes by John Marincola (Penguin Classics 1954, second revised edition 1996). Translation copyright 1954 by Aubrey de Sélincourt. This revised edition copyright © John Marincola, 1996.

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exerted himself to win his support, saying he had suffered injuries not unlike his own. He had already paved the way to his design by severally persuading the great Median nobles that it would be to their advantage, in view of the harshness of Astyges' rule, to dethrone him in favour of Cyrus. This done by way of preparation, Harpagus wished to inform Cyrus of his purpose; but, as Cyrus lived in Persia and the roads were guarded, there was only one way he could think of to get a message through to him: this was by slitting open a hare, without pulling the fur off, and inserting into its belly a slip of paper on which he had written what he wanted to say. He then sewed up the hare, gave it to a trusted servant, together with a net to make him look like a huntsman, and sent him off to Persia with orders to present the hare to Cyrus, and tell him by word of mouth to cut it open with his own hands, and to let no one be present while he did so. The orders were obeyed. Cyrus received the hare, cut it open, found the letter inside and read it. 'Son of Camby-ses,' it ran, 'since the gods watch over you—for without them you would never have been so fortunate—pay back Astyges, your would-be murderer. Had he achieved his purpose, you would have died; to the gods, and to me, you owe your deliverance. Doubtless you have long known what was done to you, and how Astyges punished me for giving you to the cowherd instead of killing you. Do now as I advise, and you will become master of the whole realm of Astyges. Persuade the Persians to revolt, and march against the Medes. It makes no odds whether I or any other Mede of distinction is appointed by the king to take command against you: you will succeed in either case, for the Median nobility will be the first to desert him and join you in the attempt to pull him down. All our preparations are made. Do what I advise, and do it quickly.'

The letter set Cyrus thinking of the means by which he could most effectively persuade the Persians to revolt, and his deliberations led him to adopt the following plan, which he found best suited to his purpose. He wrote on a roll of paper that Astyges had appointed him to command the Persian army; then he summoned an assembly of the Persians, opened the roll in their presence and read out what he had written. 'And now,' he added, 'I have an order for you: every man is to appear on parade with a sickle.' The Persian nation contains a number of tribes, and the ones which Cyrus assembled and persuaded to revolt were the Pasargadae, Maraphii, and Maspii, upon which all the other tribes are dependent. . . . Other tribes are the Panthialaei, Derusiaei, Germanii, all of which are attached to the soil, the remainder—the Dai, Mardi, Dropici, Sagartii—being nomadic.

The order was obeyed. All the men assembled with their sickles, and Cyrus' next command was that before the day was out they should clear a certain piece of rough land full of thorn bushes, about eighteen or twenty furlongs square. This too was done, whereupon Cyrus issued the further order that they should present themselves again on the following day, after having taken a bath. Meanwhile Cyrus collected and slaughtered all his father's goats, sheep, and oxen in preparation for entertaining the whole Persian army at a banquet, together with the best wine and bread he could procure. The next day the guests assembled, and were told to sit down on the grass and enjoy themselves. After the meal Cyrus asked them which they preferred—yesterday's work or today's amusement; and they replied that it was indeed a far cry from the previous day's misery to their present pleasures. This was

the answer which Cyrus wanted; he seized upon it at once and proceeded to lay bare what he had in mind. 'Men of Persia,' he said, 'listen to me: obey my orders, and you will be able to enjoy a thousand pleasures as good as this without ever turning your hands to servile labour; but, if you disobey, yesterday's task will be the pattern of innumerable others you will be forced to perform. Take my advice and win your freedom. I am the man destined to undertake your liberation, and it is my belief that you are a match for the Medes in war as in everything else. It is the truth I tell you. Do not delay, but fling off the yoke of Astyges at once.'

The Persians had long resented their subjection to the Medes. At last they had found a leader, and welcomed with enthusiasm the prospect of liberty.

When news of these events reached Astyges, he summoned Cyrus to appear before him; but Cyrus' answer was to send the messenger back with the threat that he would be there a good deal sooner than Astyges liked. Astyges thereupon armed the Medes to a man, and so far lost his wits as to appoint Harpagus to command them—having apparently forgotten how he had treated him. The result was that when they took the field and engaged the Persian army, a few who were not in the plot did their duty, but of the remainder some deserted to the Persians and the greater number deliberately fought badly and took to their heels. When Astyges learnt of the disgraceful collapse of the Median army, he swore that even so Cyrus should not get away with it so easily; then, having first impaled the Magi who had advised him to let Cyrus go, he armed all Medes, both under and over military age, who had been left in the city, led them out to battle and was defeated. His men were killed and he himself was taken alive.

After the capture of Astyges, Harpagus came and jeered at him, the most bitter of his insults being a reference to the supper at which the king had regaled him with his son's flesh, followed by the question of what it felt like to be a slave instead of a king. Astyges looked at him and countered the question by another: did Harpagus, he asked, claim responsibility for what Cyrus had done? Harpagus replied that he most certainly did, for it was he who wrote the letter urging Cyrus to revolt.

'Then,' said Astyges, 'you are not only the wickedest but the most stupid of men: you are stupid, because when you might have been king yourself (if you really were responsible for what has happened) you gave another man the power; and you are wicked, because merely on account of that supper you have brought the Medes into slavery. If you had to hand the throne over to somebody else rather than keep it to yourself, it would have been more proper to give so fine a prize to a Mede than to a Persian; but as things are, the innocent Medes have become slaves instead of masters, and the Persians masters of the Medes though they were once their slaves.' . . .

On the present occasion the Persians under Cyrus rose against the Medes and from then onwards were masters of Asia. . . .

The following are certain Persian customs which I can describe from personal knowledge. The erection of statues, temples, and altars is not an accepted practice amongst them, and anyone who does such a thing is considered a fool, because, presumably, the Persian religion is not anthropomorphic like the Greek. Zeus, in their system, is the whole circle of the heavens, and they sacrifice to him from the

king and for the general good of the community, of which he is himself a part. . . . Of all days in the year a Persian most distinguishes his birthday, and celebrates it with a dinner of special magnificence. A rich Persian on his birthday will have an ox or a horse or a camel or a donkey baked whole in the oven and served up at table, and the poor some smaller beast. The main dishes at their meals are few, but they have many sorts of dessert, the various courses being served separately. It is this custom that has made them say that the Greeks leave the table hungry, because they never have anything worth mentioning after the first course: they think that if the Greeks did, they should go on eating. They are very fond of wine, and no one is allowed to vomit or urinate in the presence of another person.

If an important decision is to be made, they discuss the question when they are drunk, and the following day the master of the house where the discussion was held submits their decision for reconsideration when they are sober. If they still approve it, it is adopted; if not, it is abandoned. Conversely, any decision they make when they are sober, is reconsidered afterwards when they are drunk. . . .

No race is so ready to adopt foreign ways as the Persian; for instance, they wear the Median costume because they think it handsomer than their own, and their soldiers wear the Egyptian corslet. Pleasures, too, of all sorts they are quick to indulge in when they get to know about them—a notable instance is pederasty, which they learned from the Greeks. Every man has a number of wives, and a much greater number of concubines. After prowess in fighting, the chief proof of manliness is to be the father of a large family of boys. Those who have most sons receive an annual present from the king—on the principle that there is strength in numbers.

The period of a boy's education is between the ages of five and twenty, and they are taught three things only: to ride, to use the bow, and to speak the truth. Before the age of five a boy lives with the women and never sees his father, the object being to spare the father distress if the child should die in the early stages of its upbringing. In my view this is a sound practice. I admire also the custom which forbids even the king himself to put a man to death for a single offence, and any Persian under similar circumstances to punish a servant by an irreparable injury. Their way is to balance faults against services, and then, if the faults are greater and more numerous, anger may take its course. . . . They consider telling lies more disgraceful than anything else, and, next to that, owing money. There are many reasons for their horror of debt, but the chief is their conviction that a man who owes money is bound also to tell lies. Sufferers from the scab or from leprosy are isolated and forbidden in the city. They say these diseases are punishments for offending the sun, and they expel any stranger who catches them: many Persians drive away even white doves, as if they, too, were guilty of the same offence. They have a profound reverence for rivers: they will never

pollute a river with urine or spittle, or even wash their hands in one, or allow anyone else to do so. . . .

All this I am able to state definitely from personal knowledge. There is another practice, however, concerning the burial of the dead, which is not spoken of openly and is something of a mystery: it is that a male Persian is never buried until the body has been torn by a bird or a dog. I know for certain that the Magi have this custom, for they are quite open about it.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How does Herodotus explain the rise of Cyrus and the Persian Empire? What kinds of arguments roused the Persians against the Medes? What kind of empire do these motivations imply? In terms of social classes, how widespread was the Persian revolt?
2. What did Herodotus find most unusual about the Persians? Do you find any of his characterizations improbable, and if so, why?
3. What was the position of men, and what was the definition of masculinity, in Persian society?
4. What features of Persian society might explain the success of the Empire?
5. Judging by what Herodotus implies, what were some key differences between Persians and Greeks? Were the Persians more or less "civilized" than the Greeks, or is it possible to say?
6. What are the advantages and disadvantages of using an outside observer account to get at the characteristics of an early civilization?

ESSAY SUGGESTIONS

- A. Discuss the reasons Herodotus, although a Greek writing soon after the bitter Persian Wars, expressed such friendly interest and admiration for Persian ways. Was this a function of his personality or a result of shared values?
- B. Compare Herodotus, as a traveler-observer, to one other traveler-observer (for example, Ibn Battuta later in this volume; see chapters 28 and 43). What are some standard issues for traveler-observers? How do different cultural and technological frameworks affect travel accounts?

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HYM

The religion of Zoroaster was spread in Persia by the Prophet Zarathustra (Zoroaster), probably around 600 B.C.E., although perhaps earlier. This seems to have been the first major religion founded by a particular, inspiring individual, although we know little about Zoroaster as a person beyond his influential writings. As an IndoEuropean people, Persians shared cultural roots with India and also with Greeks and Romans; Zoroastrianism, however, was a distinctive religious product, an ethical monotheism that can usefully be compared with Judaism, whose roots are somewhat earlier and seemingly quite separate. Zoroastrianism must also be treated in terms of change, away from the kinds of religions that had prevailed previously in Mesopotamia; not only ideas but also practices (like animal sacrifice, of which Zoroaster firmly disapproved) were significantly challenged.

The following passage suggests some of the main features of this religion, including its ethical system and its relationship to activities in life on Earth.

Zoroastrianism became deeply embedded in Iran, the Hymns or Gathas playing a role quite similar to the Old Testament's service for the Hebrews. Ultimately, the religion was eclipsed by the spread of Islam to Persia, but pockets survived; and it has also been argued that Zoroastrianism had significant influence on other religions that formed in the region, including Christianity.

HYMNS OF ZARATHUSTRA, VERSE 33

1

Towards the wicked man and the righteous one
And him in whom right and wrong meet
Shall the judge act in upright manner,
According to the laws of the present existence.

2

He who by word or thought or hands
Works evil to the wicked one,
Or he who converts his clansman to the good,
They please the Lord and fulfil his will.

From Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin, ed., *The Hymns of Zarathustra* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1952), pp. 49–51, 103–107. Used with permission from John Murray Publishers, Ltd.

3

He who, belonging to family or village or tribe, O Lord,
Is most good to the righteous man, or labours for the care of the herd,
He shall be in the pasture of Righteousness and of Good Mind.

• • •

4

I who by my prayer will keep from thee, O Wise One, disobedience and Bad Mind,
Discord from the family, from the village the evil that is very near,
The oppressors from the tribe, and from the herd's pasture the worst steward,

5

I who will invoke thy Discipline as the mightiest of all,
At the outcome, when I shall attain the long life,
The Dominion of the Good Mind and the straight paths of Right
Wherein dwells the Wise Lord,

6

I who, a priest, would learn through Righteousness,
Would learn from the Best Mind the straight paths,
Henceforth to practise husbandry in the sense in which it has been
ordained,
I strive therefore to see thee and take counsel with thee, O Wise Lord!

Verse 30

1

Now will I speak to those who will hear
Of the things which the initiate should remember:
The praises and prayer of the Good Mind to the Lord
And the joy which he shall see in the light who has remembered them well.

2

Hear with your ears that which is the sovereign good;
With a clear mind look upon the two sides
Between which each man must choose for himself,
Watchful beforehand that the great test may be accomplished in our favour.

3

Now at the beginning the twin spirits have declared their nature,
The better and the evil,
In thought and word and deed. And between the two
The wise ones choose well, not so the foolish.

And when these two spirits came together,
In the beginning they established life and non-life,
And that at the last the worst existence should be for the wicked,
But for the righteous one the Best Mind.

5

Of these two spirits, the evil one chose to do the worst things;
But the Most Holy Spirit, clothed in the most steadfast heavens,
Joined himself unto Righteousness;
And thus did all those who delight to please the Wise Lord by honest deeds.

6

Between the two, the false gods also did not choose rightly,
For while they pondered they were beset by error,
So that they chose the Worst Mind.
Then did they hasten to join themselves unto Fury,
That they might by it deprave the existence of man.

7

And to him came Devotion, together with Dominion, Good Mind and
Righteousness:
She gave endurance of body and the breath of life,
That he may be thine apart from them,
As the first by the retributions through the metal.

8

And when their punishment shall come to these sinners,
Then, O Wise One, shall thy Dominion, with the Good Mind,
Be granted to those who have delivered Evil into the hands of Righteousness, O
Lord!

9

And may we be those that renew this existence!
O Wise One, and you other Lords, and Righteousness, bring your alliance,
That thoughts may gather where wisdom is faint.

10

Then shall Evil cease to flourish,
While those who have acquired good fame
Shall reap the promised reward
In the blessed dwelling of the Good Mind, of the Wise One, and of Righteousness.

If you, O men, understand the commandments which the Wise One has given,
Well-being and suffering—long torment for the wicked and salvation for
the righteous—
All shall hereafter be for the best.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What were the distinctive features of Zoroastrianism as a religion? What features were similar to other major Middle Eastern and Indian religions?
2. What major changes did Zoroastrianism bring to the traditional religions in Mesopotamia?
3. What are some reasons that explain why Persians might convert to this new religion?
4. What are the similarities and differences between Zoroastrianism and Judaism? Between Zoroastrianism and early Hinduism in India?
5. What similarities exist between Christianity and Zoroastrianism, and why would early Christians worry about specific Zoroastrian influences?
6. What does this document reveal about the nature of Persian society and economy? How can the document be used as social evidence?

ESSAY SUGGESTIONS

- A. Using this document but also Chapters 1 and 2, discuss possible connections between earlier Mesopotamian religions and legal beliefs and Zoroastrianism. Note also, however, the major differences or changes.
- B. Identify and discuss three major differences between religions that originated in the Middle East, like Zoroastrianism, and those that originated in India (use Chapters 19, 20, and 23 on Hinduism and Buddhism).

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